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NUTRITION COMMITTEE NEWS

For exchange of
information on
nutrition education and
school lunch activities

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, Washington, D. C.

JUN 27 1962
CURRENT SERIAL RECORDS

MAY-JUNE 1962

NUTRITION EDUCATION CONFERENCE - 1962

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On January 29, approximately 300 persons interested in nutrition education gathered at the Willard Hotel in Washington, D. C., to consider one of today's major nutrition problems—children's food habits. The participants came to explore the problem and possible solutions. They considered the known contributing factors, the potential of coordinated educational programs, and the contributions that interested school and community groups might make to such programs.

The conference continued through a luncheon session on January 31. Participants reported they were leaving with renewed enthusiasm for the job to be done.

PLANNING THE CONFERENCE

Planning for the conference began in 1960. Members of the sponsoring groups—Nutrition Programs Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Interagency Committee on Nutrition Education and School Lunch—held numerous serious discussions on the need for a conference at this time, what the focus might be, and the choice of a suitable theme.

Because food habits begin to form early in life, it was decided to focus this conference on improving nutrition education for children. In the months that followed, plans for the program and selection of participants were developed concurrently.

Participants

It was decided that participants be invited from the many groups and organizations in the United States that are in a position to influence nutrition education of children. Invitations went to representatives from State nutrition committees, State and city departments of public welfare, public health, and public instruction, State exten-

sion services, professional organizations, youth organizations, schools and colleges, the food industry, and of the Federal Government (including the Interagency Committee on Nutrition Education and School Lunch).

Program

Because of the diverse background and interests of the participants, the program for Monday, the first day, was devoted to giving enough background information so that this mixed group would start with a common understanding of why we had a conference and what some of the problems are. Thus, the talks were concerned with (1) how children grow and develop, (2) what they eat and how good are their diets, and (3) some persistent nutritional problems.

Background information concerning how children learn was the leadoff presentation on Tuesday morning. The remainder of this session was given to small group discussions of the important problems associated with nutrition education for children. This was followed by a symposium on Tuesday afternoon on the factors which influence children's food habits such as (1) general cultural factors, (2) the mass media, and (3) the home and community.

The Wednesday morning session opened with the small groups meeting again to explore together possible approaches to the persistent problems. A panel discussion followed during which representatives from health agencies, schools, extension service, the food industry, and community organizations described opportunities for furthering nutrition education.

The conference was concluded by highlighting the implications for the job to be done in the years ahead that had been gained from the presentations and discussions. Participants were challenged to take into account the spectrum of disciplines influencing nutrition education when planning programs or activities.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE CONFERENCE

Growth and Nutritional Needs of Children

Dr. Pauline Stitt, Associate Professor of Preventive Medicine and Pediatrics, Boston University School of Medicine, emphasized that growth rate varies with the age of the child and that nutritional needs vary correspondingly. Potential growth is influenced by many factors including nutrition, familial determinants, rest, exercise, and the like. It is necessary to take these facts into account in distinguishing between small appetite and poor appetite in an individual child. Failure to make such judgments may lead to encouragement of overeating to the point of obesity in children.

Preschoolers and primary grade children encounter the many infectious diseases of childhood, with their accompanying nutritional needs for convalescence. Otherwise these children are moving along steadily but often rather inconspicuously in their growth. They are also getting ready for the pre-adolescent growth spurt and the body changes which adolescence brings. For both boys and girls, there will be great demands on their nutritional resources.

The adolescent girl, particularly, needs good nutritional resources. In the words of Dr. Stitt, "Whoever provides good nutrition for an adolescent girl may unwittingly influence multitudes, not only through the care and replenishment of the girl's own physical resources but through awakening her to awareness of good nutrition, so that at a later time she may guide and protect those who come into her life."

Patterns of Food Selection

Ruth Leverton, Ph.D., Assistant Administrator, Agricultural Research Service, gave specific attention to children's diets, and how good many of them are. On the whole, the nutritional status of our children today is probably as high as at any time in our history. The diets that are inadequate are short in calcium, vitamin C, and vitamin A, in that order. Increased amounts of milk and milk products and fruits and vegetables—especially those rich in vitamin C and vitamin A—are needed by some children.

Dr. Leverton emphasized the importance of teaching good patterns of food selection because patterns of behavior can be more potent than knowledge in directing actions. Knowledge of itself does not have the power to make its possessors use it. Thus in every aspect of behavior, whether we are learning or teaching, we are seeking patterns to use as guidelines to effective living.

In nutrition education, our goal is patterns of food selection that offer freedom for cultural and personal

preferences, patterns that accommodate to various circumstances of income and environment, and that are consistent with scientific principles. "Food for Fitness," and its predecessor, "The Basic Seven," are well-known patterns developed for such use, which have stood the test of time.

Some teenagers alter their patterns of food selection as a means of asserting their independence. If they have had good patterns as children and receive sympathetic guidance during adolescence, such alterations need not result in inadequate diets.

Some children are developing patterns that lead to overweight. Several imbalances are responsible:

1. Between amount of energy supplied by food and amount needed for normal growth and activity.
2. Between amount of energy in relation to amount of other nutrients supplied by popular foods.
3. Between number of ways and times food is used in our way of life and one's need for food.
4. Between the number of opportunities for making choices and the amount of training and practice children have had in making good choices.

How Children Learn

Dr. Robert S. Fleming, Assistant Commissioner of Education, New Jersey State Department of Education, presented some concepts dealing with how children learn. Learning takes place as children—

- learn what they live
- learn what they do
- learn with others
- learn as they are helped to clarify purposes
- learn as they have rewards
- learn as they have teachers who are guides

Learning may be facilitated in a number of ways. Dr. Fleming set forth some guidelines for this purpose which he has found helpful.

1. Teachers should be prepared or ready to receive each learner. The more the teacher knows about the individual learner—his background, past experiences, ambitions and perceptions, his community and its resources—the greater the potential for good working relationships between them.
2. Learning usually proceeds more rapidly and pleasantly when the educational climate is warm, exciting, and idea-generating. Students are more likely to accept ideas and procedures when they feel themselves accepted, when they have confidence in their teacher and his know-how, and when their curiosity and interest have been aroused. All this helps to bring interaction between pupils and teacher early in the learning situation.

A two-way process of communication is essential. Emphasis on human relation factors helps to avoid many learning hazards.

3. Specific, clear-cut purposes need to be identified. This may be carried on cooperatively, but purposes must be realistic, and suited to group maturity.
4. The learner should be actively involved in achieving objectives. Experiences should include exploring, discovery, questioning, experimenting, analyzing, discussing, comparing, evaluating, summarizing, and demonstrating on a level consistent with the age and maturity of the children.
5. A variety of learning materials used in many ways establishes meaning for the experiences in which pupils become involved.
6. Continuous use of a variety of evaluative procedures helps to assess progress and to determine any blocks which slow up the learning process.

Factors Influencing Children's Food Habits

Cultural factors.—Food preferences of the family certainly influence children's food habits, but some of the current trends in U.S. cultural change are likely to affect them also.

An example of this is the increasing use of vending machines. One effect is piecemeal eating—a practice more closely related to primitive cultures than to our own older pattern of widely-spaced meals. Casual eating fits into the growing trend of all family members—from nursery school tots to grandparents—to eat away from home.

Impersonal mass feeding via machines is confined to a few generally accepted foods—machines are not designed to serve crisp, raw vegetables, for example. Such a trend is not conducive to helping children learn to eat a wide variety of the foods which contribute to an adequate diet.

Mass media.—Studies indicate the increasing influence of all the mass media—television, radio, movies, newspapers, and the like—on children of all ages.

Viewing television has promoted snack eating and tray dinners. TV advertising has also introduced a wide variety of food products and encouraged children to eat them.

Because so many children are reached and influenced by mass media, it probably could be used as an educative tool to promote behavioral changes in eating habits. Methods for using it effectively would need to be determined and used concurrently with other educational approaches.

Home and community.—The family is the most important factor in influencing children's food habits. Food

habits are built on the experiences children have with foods and, for the most part, on experiences which children and parents or other influential adults have together. The personality of the adult caring for the very young child is most important in determining whether or not feeding problems develop. During the school years, the community becomes an important influence. Cultural change toward informal living has caused many families to have fewer meals together as a family unit except perhaps on weekends and holidays.

The availability of an increased variety of foods—raw, processed, and prepared—increases the choices that children may make and correspondingly increases the need for nutrition education.

Opportunities for Furthering Nutrition Education

Representatives from several groups (health agencies, schools, extension service, food industry, community organizations) operating in communities reported on opportunities for furthering nutrition education. Each group has its unique focus, resources, and avenues of communication. All have important responsibilities and objectives. All see their work as a part of the whole job to be done.

Because nutrition education activities are sponsored by many groups, it is important that the public (individuals responsible for their own health or that of other family members) also understand that these groups are not in competition but are working for a common goal—good nutrition for everyone.

For this reason, these speakers advocated joint planning for study of community nutrition needs and identification of community resources as a basis for planning and conducting a variety of programs for people of all ages.

A Look Ahead

E. Neige Todhunter, Ph.D., Dean of Home Economics, University of Alabama, spoke at the closing session on some of the ideas that had been presented by speakers or discussed in the small groups that might well influence our activities in the years ahead.

A challenge.—Dr. Todhunter observed that, as Americans, we should be able to describe our population as well-nourished individuals who enjoy eating the food produced by agriculture and processed and distributed by responsible persons.

If the ideal is to be even approached, people will have to learn to use the facts established by science. We must remember, however, that no generation inherits the knowledge of another—it must be learned by each generation.

Problems identified.—Some of the roadblocks or problems on which we need to work to promote the achievement of our purpose were identified as follows:

1. How to get people to change food practices.
2. How to involve people in experiences that may lead to improvement of diets.
3. How to combat food faddism and prejudice.
4. How to increase effectiveness of nutrition education.

Many approaches to problems.—No one method is the answer to all problems. Regardless of how these problems are approached, it is essential that we (1) *know our subject*, (2) *understand people of all ages*, and (3) *apply sound principles of learning*.

Hope for action in several areas.—(1) Research—we need to know many things. For example, we need to know more about the effect of frequency of eating on nutrition. More research is also needed on how people learn and how attitudes and habits are formed.

(2) School programs—we need ongoing, sequential programs that are an integral part of the total curriculum, particularly in the elementary school. This work should be taught by competent teachers with an adequate background in nutrition.

(3) Mass media—we need to make wise use of all types of mass media to carry authoritative nutrition information.

(4) Materials—we need sound materials for teachers and pupils, particularly teenagers.

EVALUATION OF THE CONFERENCE

How to measure participant satisfaction with a conference, and, to some extent, the effectiveness of meetings always poses a problem. Furthermore, the committee did not wish to harass visitors with forms to complete.

Objectives

The committee had several reasons for requesting participant response. They were as follows:

1. To provide an opportunity for all participants to put some of their attitudes and ideas on record rather early in the conference.
2. To learn which nutritional problems participants felt were most acute in the communities they represented. This information would be helpful to

group discussion leaders participating in the Tuesday morning session.

3. To get the opinion of participants on the structure and content of the meetings as a basis for possible future planning.
4. To get a general view of participant satisfaction with the conference.
5. To learn in what ways, if any, the meetings were of practical value to the participants after they returned home.

Procedure

Formal evaluation.—Participants were asked to complete two forms at the conference—one at the end of the first day and the other at the final session. A third form will be mailed to participants in September 1962.

Informal evaluation.—Because general impressions are difficult to describe in a form that can be tabulated quickly, an informal evaluation—spot interviews—is underway.

Results

The completed evaluation forms and the summaries of the informal interviews will be studied and a report of the total evaluation will appear in a later issue of NCN.

FOLLOWUP

The sponsoring groups were most concerned that something be done to promote action as a result of the conference. Therefore, an *ad hoc* committee was invited to consider how this might best be accomplished.

The committee, a small group of selected conference participants, met with the Program Planning Committee immediately after the conference to identify what appear to them to be necessary areas for action.

- Research—(1) more nutrition education research is needed to provide the basis for developing goals and concepts.
(2) Research on the mass media is needed to determine how to use it in promoting good nutrition.
- Training programs—to provide leaders for nutrition education programs who are well grounded in both subject matter and methods.
- Coordination—to develop a systematic approach to coordination of resources and activities.